

## **Place for aging veterans may be in the works**

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Florida's 1.8 million veterans have a nearly \$16 million stake in the legislative session that begins next month, and they already have the state's most powerful politician in their corner.

Tucked into the \$70.8 billion state spending proposal Gov. Jeb Bush released last week is a \$15.6 million request for a sixth state veterans' nursing home in St. John's County. Proposed for a 15-acre site near Interstate 95 and S.R. 16 in St. Augustine, the 120-bed facility will accommodate 60 veterans with dementia and 60 who require skilled nursing care.

"We really do appreciate the commitment," said John Newstreet, executive director of the American Legion in Florida. The group represents 130,000 veterans in Florida and 318 local posts. "We support them."

With the country at war in Iraq, veterans' issues prominent on the political radar screen and state coffers bulging with more than \$5 billion in unexpected new tax dollars from a post-hurricane construction boom, the Republican-dominated Legislature is expected to go along with Bush's request.

That will be good news for a state that ranks as the second-largest in the nation in terms of veteran population, said Earl Daniell, a retired Marine colonel and spokesman for the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs.

Florida's five state veterans' facilities - in Daytona Beach, Land-o-Lakes, Springfield, Lake City and Port Charlotte - serve veterans throughout the state but are targeted to areas with highest need. The state chose St. Augustine after consultant Health Strategies Inc. identified a nearby region of Nassau, Baker and Duval counties as the region with the most pressing need.

Any Florida veteran who has lived in the state for a year may apply for one of the 120 slots, but each must meet requirements set by state statute and require care that matches the facility's capabilities, according to department regulations.